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Presidential Address

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PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

As I approached this talk which will introduce the twenty-first Convention of the Mariological Society of America I felt the perennial temptation to hearken back to Vatican Council II and its relation to our Lady. This is a temptation to which I perennially succumb. Five years ago the news media announced that they were reliably informed that the Council intended to downgrade the Blessed Mother. As evidence they pointed to the rejection of the separate schema on the Mother of God. On the other hand the Fathers of the Council who moved that the separate schema be put aside in favor of a section on Mary within the Constitution on the Church insist that they had no such intention. They were convinced that placing the teaching of the Council on the Mother of God within the context of the mystery of Christ and the Church would add luster to her name. Many of the Fathers constantly repeated that the purpose of the Council was pastoral and ecumenical renewal so they saw Mary's role in the economy of salvation enhanced when seen in this setting. They urged that the image of Mary as given concretely in the sources would speak more forcibly to the men and women of this generation than the abstract formulae of more recent theology.

The five years since *Lumen Gentium* seem like a century and the memory of what took place may become a little blurred. In spite of the assurances of the Fathers there are many who continue to insist that the Council played down our Lady's role in the Church. On the other hand the theologians who have given concentrated attention to Chapter VIII of *Lumen Gentium* are finding more and more meaning and relevance in its teach-

ing¹ There can be no doubt that devotion to Mary has diminished since the Council, yet it would be well for us not to assign causes for this until we have weighed the phenomenon more carefully. Later on in this paper I should like to present a few ideas on the diminishing regard for some of the prerogatives of Our Lady; my treatment will not be exhaustive but merely suggestive of what I am convinced would be a profitable line of inquiry. It would be well for all of us to try to understand our times as well as the theology of the Mother of God so that we may be able to present the very rich conciliar Mariology to this generation of the People of God.

Diminishing devotion to Our Lady may be an occasion for pessimism, for a counterbalance we should turn to and take hope from a brighter side of the picture. The Mariologists who insist that Vatican II gave a new charter to the study of Mary can point to an awakening interest in the Mother of Jesus among the heirs of the Reformation. We can also observe that Catholics and Orthodox are beginning to understand each other when they speak of the Theotokos. Catholics have long shared with the Orthodox a great love for the Mother of God yet we have managed to talk past each other and not really communicate when we spoke about her. In 1970 it seems to be taken for granted that all theology must face the challenge of Mary. In the words of John Macquarrie: "In this era of ecumenical exchange, no theology can fail to say anything on the subject of mariology."²

I imagine that Father Eamon will expand on Protestant contributions to Mariology and their importance in our time. I find the attention paid to Mary in Protestant theology in the past

¹ See for example: René Laurentin, *The Present Crisis in Mariology: Rise or Fall of Mariology*, Department of Theology, University of Dayton, Dayton, Ohio (1968), Eamon R. Carroll, O.Carm. "Mary and the Church" *AER* 160 (1969) 291-311; Bernhard Langemeyer, O.F.M., *Maria in der Kirchenkonstitution des Konzils*, in *TG* (1968) 19-39.

² John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology* (Scribners, New York, 1966) 260

few years the source of gratification. This is not to say that our separated brethren are accepting Catholic teaching on Our Lady—for the most part they are not. What is worthy of note is that the teaching of Vatican II on Mary receives a sympathetic response from other Christians. Mary seen in the mystery of Christ and the Church as shown within the concrete teaching of the sources of revelation at least commands respect from those who do not share our convictions. Some Protestants seem to be discovering Mary in the Scriptures at the time when many Catholics are neglecting her.

We would not be very knowledgeable or intelligent if we were to imagine that everything in the Church began with Vatican II. However, I think there is a sense in which we can say that Chapter VIII of *Lumen gentium* was the beginning of official ecumenical dialogue about the Mother of God. The ecumenical dialogue has forced us to review everything that is presented or has been presented as Marian doctrine within the broad range of Catholic theological or devotional literature. We may become emotionally disturbed when we hear our teaching criticized by outsiders, yet most of us will have to admit that we can remember statements about our Lady made in piety and love which were hardly defensible. In the present climate of dialogue Catholic authors do not hesitate to admit that many affirmations about Our Lady were gratuitous if not erroneous. To be sure, today we find our greatest difficulty not in what was said but how it was said. The Counter-Reformation reaction to the denigration of Mary was often exaggerated; unfortunately it is possible that the rejection of Marian devotions by some modern Catholics may be traced to an emotional response to these extravagances.

There is enough written on this negative aspect of Mariology and Marian devotion so that we do not have to dwell on it here. As I look back over past several years in the meetings of the Mariological Society I feel a debt of gratitude to the speakers who helped us to penetrate the meaning of Mary as found in

the Scriptures and also to those who shared their theological insights about her. For this reason I feel that we should be grateful that we are forced to search the Scriptures and the Fathers for a reappreciation of the Mother of God. Laurentin reminds us that "The meaning of the Gospel and the meaning of present day man are correlative."³ Therefore we should be thankful that we are forced to see Our Lady in her theological context and in her meaning for modern man

Earlier I stated that I should like to spend a little time examining the reasons for the decline in Marian devotion and the diminishing regard for some of Mary's prerogatives. During this Convention we shall be reinvestigating the topic of Our Lady's virginity. The reason why this topic was considered for restudy is precisely the lack of regard for this prerogative. While leaving the presentation of the subject to the speakers with assigned topics, I intend to present, very timidly and tentatively, a few reflections about some sources from which these current difficulties may arise.

Unless I am mistaken it is not necessary to demonstrate that the problem of celibacy in general and the problem of Our Lady's virginity are closely allied. There are all sorts of statistics about what priests and religious think about celibacy; statistics about belief in Our Lady's virginity are not so easily come by. I am inclined to feel that if we were in possession of statistics indicating the state of acceptance of Mary's virginity we would be shocked. Writers calling themselves Catholic have questioned not only Mary's perpetual virginity but also the Virgin Birth of Our Lord. Theologians proposing radical doctrines have a way of attracting followers in great numbers.

Needless to say what is being proposed here is not a defense of this attitude but merely an attempt to understand it. Most of us have difficulty in reconciling this selective approach to clearly taught doctrines of the Church with our notion of faith. However, this is no time to present pronouncements of the

³ René Laurentin, *op cit.*, 8

Church as if they will remove all doubts. The pronouncements of the Church must be presented but in a very highly developed framework

In preparing such a framework our first task is to try to penetrate the intellectual atmosphere in which modern man lives. At least some manifestations of the modern mind seem to have no difficulty in living with and even accepting contradictory ideas and points of view. Modern man would appear to have no problem in being idealistic and mystical yet (simultaneously) naturalistic. Moreover the transcendent and supernatural poses an almost insurmountable hurdle. Added to this a type of neo-docetism emotionally rejects concrete embodiment of God's redeeming work in material reality

In the light of this neo-docetism it is next to impossible to fathom and reconcile an almost pervasive mystique of sexuality. Quite simply the notion that virginity or celibacy might be a higher state than marriage is rejected out of hand. Further some will argue that the Catholic notion of virginity rose within a cultural milieu in which sex was considered evil. Even the doctrine of the Virgin Birth is attributed to a misunderstanding of the beauty and goodness of marriage and the marriage act

Judging from the violent anger and bitterness surrounding the whole discussion of celibacy within the Church a great many Catholics must have grown up with the notion that sex is evil. We know that this is the exact opposite of what the Church taught but the emotional involvement apparent in the current discussion reveals that this is what was communicated to them, and rightly or wrongly this is what they believed.

The emotional reactions present in almost any discussion of celibacy should give us pause. In the first place they render a rational dialogue well nigh impossible. These reactions show us what we must consider in any attempt to communicate a truth of religion just as we must consider the emotions in an attempt to communicate any truth. By mentioning the problem of communication I am vulnerable to the charge of in-

dulging in clichés; however, beneath the current discussion among the publicists there is a profound problem that is exercising educators, psychologists and sociologists not to speak of philosophers and theologians. Theologians are increasingly beginning to realize that more than a clear presentation of revelation is necessary for someone to be able to apprehend the divine message. The personal possession of the truth involves the whole person

Concentration on the problem of communication has supplied some fresh insights, yet I do not feel that they are entirely new. It has been commonplace for all of us to take for granted the emotional resonances of our response to God's message. The more recent controversies about the ability of the human intellect to know the existence of God have emphasized the conviction that the acceptance of the existence of God is more than an intellectual exercise. We are totally immersed in God's existence, so if we accept Him we must do so totally with our entire being. We may, or may not, have adverted to the notion that every religious truth makes similar demands on our entire personality. An argument, which is still possible, about whether we can accept religious values abstractly without commitment does not have much meaning. Unless I misread the signs, the direction of epistemology is to question our apprehension of a truth unless we commit ourselves to it. Love enters into the very act of knowing.

The modern emphasis on commitment and love in our grasp of knowledge does not simply issue in a homiletic plea that we recommit ourselves to celibacy or at least to purity in our state in life after the model of our Lady. It goes far beyond this to demonstrate that we cannot understand her virginity unless we are committed to Our Lord.

Insofar as the virginity of Mary is a modern problem it is a problem for two reasons. The first is sociological—what is called the social structure of reality; the second is the difficulty many modern young people have in apprehending this truth

as vitally affecting their lives. These two elements of the problem may tend to merge as we try to analyze what is conditioning the values of our contemporaries and wherein they seek the meaning of their lives. The social structure certainly is glorifying sex. This is not always in the cruder manifestations of what we mean by sex, although these are not excluded. Relationships on the horizontal plane especially within the marriage bond are seen as the highest human value. Moreover one's own self fulfillment is never realized except in the intimate exchange of married life.

Our response to this must be total as was our Lady's. In the first place the Virgin Birth reveals to us that He who came into the world to communicate His life to us is God. There is a hunger in the depths of our being which is satisfied by Him alone. Beyond that Mary's perpetual virginity continues to show the world in itself and in those who choose to follow her that the deepest most meaningful value in human life is God's presence within us.

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